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Culling the Flock

The Hen That Lays is the
Hen That Pays

Why Cull

When to Cull

How to Cull

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Culling the Flock

Why cull?—With feed high in price and in many cases difficult to get, it is of greatest importance to cull the poultry flock. Culling serves two purposes: First, it insures that the feed will be consumed by the better-producing hens, thereby increasing the profit. Second, it makes it possible to save those best suited for breeders, both on account of their better production and on account of their superior strength and vitality, qualities so essential to layers if they are to stand up under the severe strain of heavy laying. Under war conditions it is imperative that the poor producers be weeded out; the slacker hen must go. Weeding out the poor hens gives those left more room and a better chance. Where trap nesting is practiced, culling is a comparatively simple process.

When to cull.—Culling should be continuous throughout the year. This continuous culling should consist of weeding out, when discovered, any hen which is sick, which is very thin or emaciated, or which shows evidences of nonproduction, weakness, or poor vitality.

The whole flock should also be given a careful and systematic culling at some one time. The hens should be handled individually and gone over carefully with the object of dividing them into two lots, one the better producers and the other the poorer producers. From the better producers it is also desirable to pick out as many of the best as will be needed for breeders. Band or otherwise mark these hens so that eggs from them only will be saved for hatching. Market those selected as the poor producers. Save for laying and breeding those selected as the better producers.

When a single systematic culling is made, the best time to do this is in August or September. At this time it is easier to form a fairly close estimate of the relative value of a hen as an egg producer and to weed out the nonproducers. Hens which show indications of laying at this time are those which on the average have been the better producers for the year. It must be remembered, too, that the better producers during the first laying year are those which will be the better producers in subsequent years. Hens showing indications of having been good producers throughout the year should be retained for the next year regardless of their age, but relatively few hens will prove to be profitable producers beyond their second laying year if of the heavier breeds, such as the Plymouth Rock, Rhode Island Red, Wyandotte, or Orpington, or beyond their third laying year if of the lighter breeds such as the Leghorn. Additional culling during July is also desirable in order to eliminate hens which have started to molt and have stopped laying.

How to cull.—In going over the entire flock for the purpose of culling there are a number of points or characteristics which should be given special attention in selecting the layers from the nonlayers. Where the different characteristics or several of them in the case of any individual agree as indicating good production or poor production, selection is comparatively accurate. Where they do not agree, judgment must be used in deciding which should be given the greatest weight. The following are the main points to consider:

Sickness and lack of vigor.—These are usually indicated by listlessness, inactivity, tendency to stay on or under the roost during the day, poor appetite, dull eye, dark or bluish color of comb, long toe nails, snaky or crow head, and the tendency to go to roost early in the evening and to be one of the last to leave the roost in the morning.

Molt.—This is one of the most valuable and easily applied tests of production. Hens cease laying completely or almost completely during the molt. The better producers lay late in the fall, and therefore molt late. Late molters also molt rapidly as a rule, while early molters molt slowly. Therefore, save the hens which have not molted by August or are only just beginning to molt late in September or in October, and discard those which have finished molting or are well into the molt. The hens which molt last, provided they are otherwise desirable, are the best ones to save for breeders. A hen which has not molted at this time is characterized by soiled and worn or broken plumage, which is especially evident in the tail plumage, while those molted or molting show clean, fresh plumage or growing feathers. Culling the early molters just as soon as they begin to molt is one of the easiest ways to weed out the poor layers.

Shank color.—In those breeds having yellow legs, the color fades out slowly as the laying season advances. The rapidity and degree to which the yellow color is lost depends to a considerable extent upon the heaviness of laying* The yellow color goes out from the scales on the front of the shanks first and finally from the scales on the rear. Hens on grass range do not lose the shank color as quickly or completely as those in bare yards. Some soils also tend to bleach the color of the legs. Hens showing strong or medium yellow shank color are almost certainly poor layers, but occasionally poor layers may show pale or white shanks. In breeds such as the Rhode Island Red where the shanks may show horn color as well as yellow, the horn must not be confused with the yellow. The rear and sides of the shank show little of this horn color. A sick hen or one in poor condition may also show pale shanks.

Beak color.—In breeds having yellow beaks, the same principle applies as in the case of the yellow shanks. However, the color is lost from the beak more quickly than from the shanks and is also regained more quickly.* The lower beak bleaches faster than the upper, but may be used where the upper is obscured by horn or black.

Vent color.—In yellow skinned breeds the yellow color of the skin immediately about the vent is quickly lost with laying, and is quickly regained after laying ceases. White or pink vent color generally indicates that the hen is laying, while a yellow vent means that the bird is not laying.

Appearance of vent.—The vent of a hen laying heavily is large, expanded, or moist, while that of a hen not laying is comparatively small, hard, puckered, and dry.

Comb.—When a hen is laying or about to lay her comb is large, waxy,† full of blood, and bright red in color. When not laying, the comb is small and shrunken, pale or dull in color, comparatively hard, and covered with whitish scales. A dark or bluish color usually indicates sickness. The changes in the wattles and ear lobes are similar to those of the comb, but not so marked. It is necessary to keep in mind the difference in size of comb of the various breeds.

Pelvic bones.—As a hen stops laying there is a tendency for her to take on fat. This is noticeable in examining the pelvic bones, the two bones which can be felt as points on either side of the vent. When the hen is laying, these bones are comparatively thin and flexible. When she is not laying, they feel thicker and less flexible, due to the fat which has accumulated there. The spread or distance apart of these pelvic bones is also a valuable indication of whether or not the hen is laying. When laying they are wider apart than when not laying. The spread can be roughly measured for practical purposes by determining how many fingers can be laid between the bones. If the spread measures two fingers or less, the probabilities

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* Taken from an outline on judging fowls for egg production prepared at a judging school held at Cornell University.

† Cornell Extension Bulletin 21.

are that the hen is not laying, while if the spread is greater, she is probably laying. In measuring this spread the size of the hens of different breeds, with the corresponding natural difference in the spread, must be kept in mind.

Distance from pelvic bones to keel bone.—A hen laying well is a good eater. Her intestines are, therefore, fuller and more distended, and require more room than when she is not laying and not eating so much.† When laying, the ovary and oviduct are of greater size and require more room. To provide this extra room, the distance from the rear end of the keel to the pelvic bones increases, with a consequent increase in size of the abdomen. A spread of three or more fingers in the smaller breeds such as the Leghorn and four or more fingers in the larger breeds such as the Plymouth Rock indicates that the hen is in a laying condition. A spread of less than three fingers in the smaller breeds and less than four fingers in the larger breeds indicates that she is not in laying condition.

Flexibility of abdomen.—When the hen is laying, the greater size of the abdomen, together with the lessened tendency to accumulate fat at this point, results in a soft flexible abdomen, suggesting, when handled, the texture of a partly milked-out udder of a cow. When laying has ceased, the abdomen grows smaller, fat is deposited there, and it feels, when handled, harder and less flexible.

In culling the flock remember that it is safer to depend upon the agreement of a combination of several characteristics rather than to select by any one alone. With this in mind—

Cull these hens.—Sick, weak, lacking vigor, inactive, poor eaters, molted or started to molt, with small, puckered, hard, dry vents; with small, shriveled, hard, dull-colored combs; with thick or coarse stiff pelvic bones, pelvic bones close together, small spread between pelvic bones and rear end of keel, and full, hard, small abdomen. In breeds with yellow skin and shanks, the discarded hens should also show yellow or medium yellow shanks and yellow beaks and vents.

Save these hens.—Healthy, strong, vigorous, alert, and active; good eaters; not molting or just beginning to molt in September or October; with large, moist vents; with large, bright-red combs; thin, pliable pelvic bones well spread apart, wide spread between pelvic bones and rear end of keel, and large, soft, pliable abdomen. In breeds with yellow skins and shanks, the hens saved should also show pale or white shanks, and pale or white beaks and vents.

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† Cornell Extension Bulletin 21.